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ABSTRACT

Examining testing practices in other countries can help formulate ideas and issues in establishing a national assessment system in the United States. Based on recent reports by the Office of Technology and Assessment and the National Endowment for the Humanities, this digest provides an overview of the national examinations in several European nations and Japan. In France and in Germany, the previously nationally standardized examination is no longer a single nationally comparable examination taken by all students for admission to universities. Both the French baccalaureate, developed in different forms to correspond to curricula, and the German "Abitur" rely on open-ended questions and, to some extent, oral examinations. In recent years, England and Wales have adopted what amounts to a national curriculum and a comprehensive assessment program. Japan uses a two-stage system for admission to universities, beginning with a standardized multiple-choice examination in five subject areas. Japanese universities then consider other factors, often including their own examinations, to admit applicants. This overview indicates that the following four issues must be considered in evaluating national testing programs: (1) examination uniformity; (2) choice of tests by students; (3) test formats; and (4) reporting methods and formats. (SLD)

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National Assessments in Europe and Japan

Mary Morello Shafer, ERIC/TM

There have been numerous proposals lately calling for the establishment of a national assessment system. Congress authorized a state-level trial administration of the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The Secretary of Labor's Commission on Acquiring Needed Skills and the Business Roundtable have separately called for a national high school graduation examination.

Examining testing practices in other countries can help formulate ideas and issues in establishing a national assessment system in the United States. Based on recent reports by the Office of Technology and Assessment and the National Endowment for the Humanities, this digest provides and overview of the national examinations in several European nations and Japan. Further information about the programs can be found in the references.

Tests in other countries

France. In the 1950s, the *baccalauréat* was a narrowly focused examination of humanities and mathematics. The test provided strict comparability across the entire country. As French schools became more diversified, serving a broader range of students and using a broader range of curricular options, the baccalauréat has become a highly differentiated, complex exam system with 28 different options and 23 different sets of questions.

Students prepare for the exam in upper-secondary schools called *lycées.* At age 15 to 16, students begin a three-year, specialized course of study. Along with the essay-type exams in the core subjects—history and geography, French, and philosophy—students take additional exams in the areas they concentrated on—philosophy and liberal arts, economics and social sciences, or mathematics and the sciences. Students also take oral exams in some subjects, usually languages.

Today, the baccalauréat is not a single, nationally comparable exam that all students take. The French Ministry of National Education determines the curricula of all schools and creates the various baccalauréat exams. In 1990, 50 percent of the lycée students took the baccalauréat, and 38.5 percent of those students passed the exam. Until recently, passing the baccalauréat admitted students to a French university, but now most prestigious schools require students to pass further exams (Madaus & Kellaghan, 1991).

Federal Republic of Germany. Like the baccalauréat, the German *Abitur* has changed over the years to respond to changes in German society. And like the baccalauréat, the German exam relies on open-ended questions and, to some extent, oral exams. In some subjects —art, music, and natural sciences— the exams may involve performance or demonstration. Although the general form of the Abitur is the same throughout the country, the individual education ministries of each state determine the specific content of the test given in their areas.

German students planning to continue their education at a university typically attend *Gymnasien,* which go through grade 13. Students take the Abitur at the end of that time. Their scores on that exam, along with their grades in their final two years at the Gymnasien, determine whether they are admitted to a German university.

In 1986, 23.7 percent of the students taking the exam qualified for the university. Today, that number is higher. Because so many students now qualify for the university in Germany, those wanting to pursue some of the most desirable fields, like medicine, have to undergo further tests and interviews and must sometimes wait some time before being admitted to those programs.

England and Wales. In one sense, assessment in England has gone through a complete cycle. First, England had a General School Certificate and an associated London Matric. Then, England and Wales abandoned these, along with the state-prescribed curriculum. In recent years, England and Wales have adopted what amounts to a national curriculum and a comprehensive assessment program. These new tests include open-ended exercises, oral exams, and realistic scenarios. England's long-standing Cities and Guilds vocational assessment program exemplifies with the United States now calls *authentic assessment.*

When students in England and Wales finish their compulsory education (around age 16), they take exams leading to the General Certificate of Secondary Education

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(GCSE). This certificate is linked to the national curriculum being developed. College-bound students then continue on to a two-year course of specialized study, usually in three areas. When they finish, they take advanced, or A-level, exams in different subject areas. In 1988–1989, 22 percent of all 18-year-olds passed one or more A-level exam; 12 percent passed three or more exams.

Regional and university-affiliated boards develop and administer the different GCSE and A-level exams used throughout England and Wales. The School Examinations and Assessment Council, established by Parliament, approves syllabuses and exams for the GCSE.

The British educational environment looks much like the U.S. educational scene today. The arguments for the changes in Britain sound much like the arguments in the United States: the schools are failing; the morale among teachers is at an all-time low; and only comprehensive testing programs will show that schools are returning value for the public's investment. That way, teachers will receive the respect and financial rewards they deserve. Critics maintain, however, that national tests will reduce teacher autonomy and that accountability for schools does not necessarily mean that students will do better.

Japan. Until 1954, Japan used a single standardized exam to determine whether students went on to a university. From 1954 to 1976, Japan tried various other systems, finally arriving at the current two-stage system. First, students planning to attend a national or local public university in Japan take the Test of the National Center for University Entrance Examination. Some students planning to attend private universities also take the exam. The multiple-choice exam covers five subject areas: Japanese, humanities and the social sciences, mathematics, science, and foreign language.

But most universities consider other factors, including grades, along with students' scores on that exam. Many universities develop their own exam and administer it to applicants. These second-stage exams usually require students to write short essays on various topics, and the exams may include some items to test students' aptitude.

Japanese students face intense competition to gain a place at a public university. In 1990, only one in four students taking the first-stage exam found a place at a university. Students often attend *juku*, "cramm schools," to prepare for their exams. And Japanese newspapers print the full text of each year's exam, indicating the importance of these exams in the country.

Issues

This brief overview outlines some of the diversity in the assessment programs of other countries. Carefully conducted case studies of these testing programs can lead to lessons that apply directly to testing in the United States. We need to consider four issues when evaluating national testing programs:

- examination uniformity,
- choice,
- format, and
- reporting.

A **uniform exam** administered nationwide provides comparable and readily communicated scores. However, a nationwide exam might ill-serve regional needs and diverse populations. Further, a national testing program might encourage a national curriculum, an idea hotly debated in many countries.

Choice means to what degree students can decide which tests to take to assess their abilities. Choice gives individual students the chance to demonstrate their interests, strengths, and potential. Using different tests, however, weakens the sense of a national culture and confuses the interpretation of the scores.

Tests can take various **formats.** Many educators argue that multiple-choice tests yield objective, comparable scores. And these tests are relatively inexpensive and easy to administer. But others argue that performance-type questions are more closely aligned to curricular goals and give more valid measures of the types of skills we're trying to instill in students.

Score **reports** can also take various forms. Numerical scores provide a semblance of precision; single numbers are easier to evaluate. Descriptions and multiple scores, however, can give much more information.

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